



Macalester College Archives, DeWitt Wallace Library
Oral History Project

Interview with: **Lee Mitau**
Board of Trustees, 1998 to 2003

Date: **Tuesday, July 1st, 2008**

Place: US Bank building, Downtown Minneapolis, Minnesota
Interviewer: Kayla Burchuk, Class of 2010

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Interview with Lee Mitau

Kayla Burchuk, Interviewer

July 1, 2008

US Bank building

Downtown Minneapolis, Minnesota

KB: My name is Kayla Burchuk and I am a Macalester student, Class of 2010, conducting interviews for the Macalester Oral History Project. Today I am interviewing Lee Mitau, a trustee from 1998 to 2003, and son of beloved former professor Ted Mitau. The date is Tuesday, July 1st, 2008, and we are in Lee's office in the US Bank building in downtown Minneapolis. So Lee, if we could just start by you saying the year you were born and the year that you first become involved with Macalester.

LM: All right. I was born in 1948, which means I will be sixty this year, which is shocking to me. And I grew up with Macalester in my life because my father was a professor there. I became aware of that quite early, and we were all part of the Macalester community. And it was a big part of our lives. We grew up in a little house in Highland Park, which was at that time a new suburb. There were *fields* across the street from us, and my sister used to go pick wild asparagus in the field—you know, it was that country-like. It was amazing. Now it's right in the middle of the city. But it was close to Macalester, it was a ten minute drive, and we spent a lot of time over there and heard a lot about it at dinner. [laughter] You know, I often think about this: in those days, at least in our family, the parents would talk and the kids were silent. That would never go in my family these days. [laughter] I mean, when my wife and I try to have a conversation now, my kids go "What? What? What are you talking about? We want to know!"

And that would just be so alien in my upbringing. I mean, my parents would sit there and my dad would talk about work, and I heard all these names: Armajani, and Dorothy Dodge, and Turck, and, you know, I didn't know who they were and I didn't ask. [laughter] We just sat there and didn't speak unless we were addressed. But that was the way it was in the fifties. But we heard all those names. And DeWitt Wallace. We had *Reader's Digest* in the house, like most faculty members did in those days. [laughter] Everybody made fun of it, but everybody subscribed. I grew up reading the jokes in *Reader's Digest*.

KB: Interesting. So as a child, what was your ongoing exposure to the Macalester community like? Did you and your family participate in faculty social events, did you spend any time on campus?

LM: Yeah, you know, again my recollection is not the best. I was young so I didn't—maybe my sister, who is five years older than I am, was more involved in some of the social stuff. My experience on campus was pretty much limited to—we'd occasionally go to a football game or a sporting event of some type. Not too many, but some. And I used to go over there and play tennis. I grew up as a tennis brat on the Macalester tennis courts, which were in those days sort of behind the field house. They're not there anymore, I don't know where they moved to, but I used to go over there and play tennis all afternoon in the hot sun. And go to the—there used to be a drug store on St. Clair and Snelling there—and get a big root beer float. [laughter] That's not there anymore either. Kitty-corner from the St. Clair broiler was a drug store. Anyway, so I hung around the campus. I'd go up to my dad's office once and a while; he had a wonderful old office in Old Main. I don't know if those offices are still there or not, but it was just a great old

office full of books and wood floor and smelled of pipe smoke. My dad was a pipe smoker. Those days you could smoke indoors. [laughter] But, you know, my parents went, I'm sure, to all sorts of faculty things. But obviously we were kids. I don't remember going to a lot of things myself.

[5:01]

KB: Do you remember anything specific about the campus growing up? Like the layout, anything about the students, other faculty members, the general kind of feel or culture of the college?

LM: You know...I don't really. I mean, we'd see faculty come over for dinner and I met Armajani and Dodge and all those people. But I didn't really get much of a feel for the student body at that time, I would have to say. Sorry.

KB: No, no problem. You're father, I'm sure as you know very well, was a very beloved and recognized figure on the Macalester campus. He was very instrumental in inspiring many students to become lawyers like yourself—

LM: —oh I know that's true.

KB: —and, you know, was known for his Socratic method—

LM: —both his kids became lawyers.

KB: Wow. And his unique personality. He really touched a lot of lives. What do you think it was about your father that made such an impression?

LM: Well, you know, I didn't attend his classes very often. I've seen him teach once or twice, my sister's seen him more. But I know from his reputation that he was—I know so many people in town who've had him as a professor. He was dynamic, he made it interesting, he was energetic, challenging, interactive, and people like teachers like that. There aren't that many scholars who are also fun teachers, and so he was special that way. Very engaging, and apparently very inspiring to some people and motivating. You're right, he was also the pre-law advisor and he thought law was a great profession. And it was in the '50s and '60s. It was better then. I mean, I'm not sure I'd recommend law for my kids today. But in those days, it was a good gig. And he recognized that, and so he did counsel everybody to go to law school. He thought it was very flexible. You could do different things, and so he advised everybody to go to law school. So, to this day, I walk down the street and people come up to me in downtown Minneapolis and Saint Paul—even now, although less and less because everybody's retired—but they come up to me and say, "Oh your father, you know, I had your father. And he told me to go to law school and I'm so glad he did." Or, "I'm not glad he did," or whatever. [laughter] Usually, "I'm glad he did." And, "here I am today, and I'm a big lawyer in town, thanks to your father." There are a lot of lawyers in town who had my father.

KB: Was your father an influential factor in yourself and your sister becoming lawyers?

LM: I've got to say yes. I mean, he recommended it to us just like he did to his students. He thought it was a good, flexible education, valuable education. It's probably not well-known, my father started law school and he didn't like it and dropped out in his first year. Which is interesting, because then he went on to tell everybody to go to law school. But he didn't like it. He liked the scholarship of public—you know, the study of government and politics. The law was just too esoteric for him; he didn't like it very much. But he must have been impressed by it, because he sent everybody else off to law school.

[8:37]

KB: Interesting. Do you remember anything about the Macalester community or campus as you got older, into the '60s and '70s?

LM: Well, you know, in the '60s and '70s I was gone. I mean, I graduated from high school in 1965 and went away to college in the East. And then I came back to the University of Minnesota for law school, but was very wrapped up in my own life at the time and didn't get much into Macalester. And then I went back East for another six years after that. So most of the '70s I was not around. I moved back to Minneapolis in 1979 when my father died, and that's actually one of the main reasons I moved back. So all I know about the '70s was what I read in the newspapers, and there was lots of campus turmoil and all that, but [it was like that at] most campuses in the country at that time.

KB: Yeah, so speaking of your education and background, you joined the Board of Trustees in 1998. What were you doing prior to joining the Board of Trustees?

LM: Well, immediately prior I was here at US Bank. I became a lawyer after law school. I clerked for a judge for a year, which is something lawyers do before they face the real world. And I went to work for [unclear], a Wall Street law firm. Then when my father became ill, it was very brief from diagnosis to death. So I made the decision—it was a hard decision—to move back to Minneapolis. I was perfectly happy in New York, but I thought I'd come home. I knew that someday I'd probably— At the time I was young and single and loving New York, but I knew that someday I'd like to settle down and have a family. Not that I had anybody in mind at the time. [laughter] But that was always in the back of my mind, and my father passing away was the trigger event that made me think, maybe now's the time for me to move home and take care of my mom. So I did that in 1979. Then I practiced law here in Minneapolis, mostly for the Dorsey & Whitney firm for many years. And then in 1995, my principle client at Dorsey & Whitney was the old First Bank. The bank formerly known as First Bank. And I came across the skyway to the General Counsel in 1995, and I've been here ever since. So that's thirteen years.

KB: Wow. So how did the opportunity present itself to join the board in 1998?

LM: Well, Michael McPherson came after me. I don't know where he got that idea, but he got it somewhere. Somebody said, "Why don't you go [unclear] Lee Mitau?" So he did and we had a couple of board meetings, and he induced me to come on the board. You know, it was odd at the time. There have been very, very few, probably still are very few, non-alumni on the board. I might have been the first, maybe deep in history there were some other ones. But it was very

rare to have anyone who wasn't an alumni. In the list of trustees, everybody has a number after their name, except me. It was really weird, you know? Because I didn't go—my father didn't want me to go to Macalester. He affirmatively refused to consider that. He didn't want me around, I think. [laughter] He was afraid I would embarrass him. No, it wasn't that. I mean, he was very sensitive to his image and his appearance and he didn't want—it was too close. He didn't want me around. And he thought it would be bad for me, too, to have, “you're Ted Mitau's son” and all that going on at the college. So it was probably a smart idea. Although economically it was a huge sacrifice for him because he got a good deal [if he sent] me to Mac. But instead he sent me to some fancy Eastern school, which cost him a lot of money and after tax dollars went out of his poor teacher's salary, it was a very big sacrifice. So...where was I?

KB: Joining the board in 1998.

[13:45]

LM: Oh, yeah. So, I was not an alum, but Michael McPherson thought because of my ties to the college I might be an interesting trustee candidate. So he came after me, you know, only because of my ties to Macalester and my father. And, [out of] respect for my father, I thought it would be fine to be a trustee. So I joined the board in 1998. And McPherson was—I mean, he was out raising money, let's be honest [laughter] and he thought I was a good prospect. I joined at the time of the “Touch the Future” campaign, which was the first major fundraising that the college had done like...ever. I mean, in a long, long time. And there was no tradition of alumni giving at Macalester to speak of because of the huge DeWitt Wallace gift. So everybody thought that it would be very, very difficult to raise funds from alumni because everybody would say, “Oh

you've got this big ton of *Reader's Digest* stock, what do you need my money for?" And that was true, that was the assumption for many years that it would be difficult. But Mike was smart enough to realize that that wasn't—you can't sustain that, and you have to grow the endowment. So he launched the first real major capital campaign to raise a, modest, by many college standards—it was like a fifty million dollar campaign. You know some schools go out and raise a billion, billion and a half. We tried to raise fifty million dollars. And Macalester alumni are notoriously not very economically driven. [laughter] Historically—they are more so now, you know, they don't have loads of investment bankers and industrialists. They don't count many of those in their alumni ranks, so it was difficult. So that kicked off right when I joined the board. Marlene Eichhorn ran it and I'd known Dick Eichhorn from my law practice. He was one of my clients many years ago. And Marlene did a great job. They ran a great campaign, and they raised all that money. So that was my first involvement on the board—was, you know, writing checks. [laughter]

KB: So you were involved in "Touch the Future," what other activities were you involved in on the board?

LM: Well, I'm trying to remember. I was on the...they put new trustees on the... I was on the Academic Committee or whatever that's called—Academic Affairs. Which I enjoyed greatly, it was very interesting. Actually, being on the Macalester board was one of the better board—I've been on a number of boards—and it was one of the better non-profit boards I've been on. I really enjoyed it a great deal. What else? I don't remember...let's see. I'm not sure—you

probably have records. I think I was on the Finance Committee. Craig Aase was the Treasurer. Is he still around? He's probably not. Is he still around?

LM: Yeah? Is he still the CFO? What do you call him?

[person off-camera]: He's the Chief Investment Officer.

LM: Oh he's the Investment...I see... But I don't really remember any specific activities. I mean, there were a number of issues going on at the time. There was a big issue about multicultural affairs. Actually, it was around the time affirmative action was a big issue and color-blind admission. There was a lot of campus turmoil, I don't really remember the details—but he formed a...like all academic institutions, the way they solve these problems is to bring in all the constituencies. And he formed some multicultural diversity committee or panel or something, and I think was dealing with it quite well. I forget what the details were. I'm trying to remember what other big issues we were dealing with...I remember the issue of Macalester's...what do they call it? Admissions policy without regard to need?

KB: Oh, need-blind.

LM: Need-blind policy was very much an issue at the time. I don't know if that ever got resolved, it's probably still an issue. I haven't kept up. We discussed that quite a bit.

KB: It was actually—it was technically 100% need-blind. No longer exists. Now it's, I believe it's 90% need-blind and then early-admission is still completely need blind.

LM: I see. Well, they made some new roads there. That was a difficult issue.

[19:48]

KB: Who served on the board with you when you were on the board?

LM: Well, your records are probably better than my memory, but Joan Mondale was on the board, and Ruth Stricker-Dayton. We built the Stricker-Dayton Campus Center. That was going up when I was there. Very nice building. That was a big issue; not a big issue but a big topic of discussion. David Ranheim, my old law-partner from Dorsey, we go way back. He's been around—he was a former student of my father's—who's been chairman of the board about three times. He's been on the board forever. And he was one of my father's teaching assistants; he was very close to my father. He was one of those people who found my father to be very influential in his life. And...let's see, who else was on there? I can't remember their names unfortunately. There were a couple of investment banker guys. One became a trustee—what's his name? I'm sorry it just slips my mind. One from Merrill-Lynch, and one from... Sorry. I could get the list...but it was a good board, it was a strong board, very interesting people. Oh! Ted Weyerhaeuser was on the board. Who's that Washington...Finn?

[person off-camera]: Peter Fenn

LM: Peter Fenn. Very interesting guy. He was like a columnist or a political journalist.

Yeah...very interesting group. I enjoyed it very much.

KB: Just to backtrack to your earlier comment, what made serving on the Macalester [board] so unique and enjoyable compared to other board experiences?

LM: Well, I liked academic institutions. I mean, colleges are great places. One day when you graduate, you'll wish you hadn't! [laughter] And it was a stimulating board, interesting issues. I liked the academic issues—that's why I enjoyed that committee. You know, Mike was just a wonderful president, I thought. Very engaging, very intelligent, very interesting. And just going to trustee meetings on the campus, it was just so fun getting that feel of being back in the academic world. I just thought it was very interesting and very fun. Macalester's a great institution. I have tremendous affection and rapport with the school. It was really enjoyable. Much more than, you know, some of the other institutions where I hadn't had that kind of historical relationship. So...colleges are fun! [laughter]

KB: You mentioned the Mike McPherson administration. Can you tell me anything else about that administration?

LM: Well...I think I covered most of the things I remember about it. I thought Mike was a very able leader. I think I covered all I remember on that.

KB: And then in terms of student interaction with the board, what was the board's relationship to students? Was there any student representation? Student controversies, anything like that?

LM: Yes, there was. [laughter] Yes, there was, there was. And, again, my memory is failing and your records, I'm sure, will help you with this. But there was some sort of student representation and I'm not sure what the official role was or how many of them there were, but I do remember that. I don't remember a lot of conflict in the board room, but I believe there were a couple of big issues. There's always some student issues. I can't remember, I'm sorry, I can't remember much about that.

KB: Interesting. And you were treasurer of the board at one point?

LM: Was I? [laughter]

KB: I think so; I think we found that in a newsletter.

LM: I think I was, I think I was. Yeah, I remember working closely with Craig. So it must have been a Finance Committee or something like that, and I was the chairman or treasurer. Yes, I remember that. You know, I'm a banker and a lawyer, so they figured I could do that. And that was interesting, that was fine. Craig was a great guy to work with. Gave my little reports to the board, don't remember much more than that. Sorry.

KB: Oh no problem. And then what caused you to leave the board in 2003?

LM: Well, personal reasons. See, it was a combination of things. Basically, not enough time is the bottom line. I'm also on two other business boards, you know, New York stock exchange companies. Right now I'm chairman of both of them. But at the time I was just on the boards and that was very time consuming. I have a real live job, unlike some of the people on the board, and I had two little kids at home, and I just had no time. And then actually the triggering event for this, again, was health problems. My mother has Alzheimer's and was starting to deteriorate a lot, and that was taking more and more of her time. I had to work on getting her into a facility, and that was the final straw when that happened. You know, I'd be sitting in these board meetings going, "You know, these people have all day, and I don't. [laughter] And I've gotta go attend to other things." It was sad, because I liked the board and I enjoyed the fellowship of the board and the college and the connection. So I miss it, but I just didn't have time. I had to triage my time.

[26:50]

KB: Tell me a little bit about your mother. She met your father after he joined the faculty or while he was a student at Macalester?

LM: Let's see. They met—he must have been still a student. She was a student. They were students. They met at a summer camp, where they were both counselors at a summer camp. They were married. In those [days] that was not young, but now it sounds young, they were like twenty, twenty-one when they got married. And I have a sister whose, again, five years older than I am. And my mother was a housewife or homemaker, whatever you call them now,

worked in the home for many years. And got very active in education too. She started in PTAs and that sort of thing, but quite active and ended up chairman of them all. And eventually ran for the Saint Paul School Board and was chairman of the Saint Paul School Board for twelve years. And she did a great job. Also, here's a cute fact. She went to the University of Minnesota, but she never finished after she started having a family, and it always bugged her. You think back on it, it must have been hard for her hanging around the academic community without a college degree. She never said anything about this; I'm just thinking back that that must have been difficult for her. But, I don't know if you know this, one of the big accomplishments of my father, after Macalester he became Chancellor of the State University System. And one of his biggest accomplishments as chancellor was the idea of this Metropolitan State University. It's morphed into something different, more than he originally conceived, but he conceived it as—it was a very innovative idea. It was a college without walls, and it wasn't going to have a campus—now it has a campus. And the idea was to permit people who didn't have a degree but had a lot of real world experience and school of hard knocks-type education to kind of enter into a contract with the university as to what additional courses they needed to take to fill out their experience and their careers and get a degree. And he was very careful not to make it some sort of easy diploma mill, but it was supposed to be quite arduous. Anyway, it was for people like my mother, and my mother ended up graduating, getting a degree from Metropolitan State University, which I think is very cute. The college that he started. So she was chairman of the school board. In fact, this is pretty embarrassing, when I graduated from high school, from Highland Park Senior High in 1965—I was the first graduating class of Highland Park, they'd just built it. I'd had to go to Saint Paul Central for two years, and then they built Highland. I graduated from Highland in 1965 and at my graduation—is this embarrassing or what?—it was

both my mother and my father. My father was the speaker, and my mother was there on behalf of the school board handing out the diplomas. Can you imagine? Oh my god [laughter]. It was terrible. Very embarrassing to a high school kid.

KB: That's pretty intense.

LM: It was. My father, he'd do a lot of these speaking engagements so he could make a few bucks, I think, and travel all over the state. You know, giving graduation speeches in June, so one of them was at my own school.

KB: Just to kind of talk about your overall approach to the board and life in general.

LM: [laughter]

KB: How has your professional life impacted how you handled board issues?

LM: Well, I do a lot of board work. I'm a lawyer by training but one of my specialties is corporate governance. I've attended *hundreds* of board meetings over my career both as a lawyer and as a director, both for profit and for nonprofit. So governance is sort of an expertise, and board dynamics and board operations is something I do a lot of. So I think that allowed me to be effective or helpful on that board. Nonprofit boards typically are very unwieldy, they're big and there are a lot of people on there just to be on there. And so it's really hard to get anything done on nonprofit boards. But Macalester was a pretty efficient board. Mike ran a

pretty good board meeting. I don't think I was a huge contributor, but I think it was helpful to have all that board experience. I didn't know a lot about academic issues so I was learning some of that stuff, but I was helpful and my financial background was helpful as treasurer and understanding the financial statements and that sort of thing. So that was helpful.

[33:15]

KB: During your time on the board, was your father's legacy ever a recurring issue? Did that guide you at all in your decision-making? Was it even ever brought up?

LM: Not really. You know, I was surprised when I got back to Macalester through the board that the strongest departments had shifted. I don't want to make a big deal of this, I don't know much about it. But I was told when my father was there the Political Science department was a powerhouse. And I'm not saying it's bad now, but I found out all of a sudden it's Biology and Health Sciences and stuff like that. And I found that to be really strange for Macalester, but it shifts around. So that was a surprise to me... No, I don't think any of that came up very much. People didn't talk about Ted Mitau. The only time I ever—it wasn't really in board meetings. But in these capital campaigns they used to trot out my father's memory [laughter] to shake the money tree from the alumni. And that was always somewhat enjoyable to me. I'd attend these fundraising dinners and they'd flash big pictures of Walter Mondale or my dad, and it was fun. But his legacy didn't really come up in the board work at all.

KB: This is a candid question, so feel free to decline.

LM: Sure, sure.

KB: But, you know, your father, he comes up in so many of these interviews we conduct, and he's such a legend in the minds of so many graduates. When people come up to you and they reflect in that way, is that the man you knew? You know, is that the same person, or...?

LM: That's a very good question. That's a very good question. That's an excellent question. There is somewhat of a disconnect there. My father was a little bit of a showman. Like many good professors or many good public speakers. You're putting on a show for the students. And like many show people, they turn it on when they're on stage, but when they're off-stage, it goes off [laughter]. So I think there was a little bit of that. I mean, I'm so used to people telling me how wonderful and fabulous and inspirational he was. And to me he was—I didn't see a lot of that. I mean, he was certainly a warm and supportive father, and a big presence in my house. He had a strong personality. But I didn't get all that inspiration or leadership or...I didn't get a lot of that. It was very interesting, and I think my sister would say the same thing. He was also very busy and private. My father's work routine would be he'd come home at six o'clock, we'd eat dinner—and I told you about dinner already—take a few minutes to grill us about whether we got any As in school that day, and then mostly it was about campus politics with my mom. And then as soon dinner was over—I mean, this was old-fashioned, sexist fifties, you know. He didn't help with dinner, he didn't help clean up. You know, I do both now [laughter] I make dinner and clean up. But my father, as soon as dinner was over, he'd stomp upstairs to his study and shut the door and study. You know, read and write and think, write books and that was his job. You know, to be a successful professor you had to publish, and when you do that you do

that at night and on weekends. So we didn't see a lot of him on a day-to-day basis. The closest we ever got to my father was because he was a professor he had summers off—he did teach summer school because he needed the money—but there was a significant chunk of time in the summer. And every summer he'd want to travel. We didn't have much money, so we'd load up everybody in the car and we'd take these amazing car trips as a family. The four of us stuck in this car for like a month or six weeks. We'd just head to California or head to New York. Again, we were poor by today's standards and staying in a motel was a big deal. We'd often camp, we had a tent and a Coleman stove, and we'd hit the road. And I loved that, and I still like that. My wife doesn't like road trips, but I just loved the open road and the freedom, and we'd go everywhere. And my mother would make us read every national monument, every plaque. And I have seen every monument from here to the West Coast. I've been to every national park numerous times. And those were very close family events. Those were the only times we ever really saw my dad. But those were fun. I have fond memories of that. And smoking a pipe in the car the whole way! Talk about second-hand smoke. I mean, I'm doomed, right? Smoking a pipe, in the car, all the time. It was amazing.

[39:22]

KB: Wow, no. Thank you so much for sharing that. In your mind, just to kind of wrap up, what makes Macalester unique as an institution?

LM: Well, I don't know if it's unique, but it's a fine liberal arts institution with a great liberal learning tradition. The internationalism is an important feature of the school. By the way, my dad was very involved with that. He helped found the World Press Institute, which I think it

petered out eventually, but it was a big deal. And my dad was very much involved with that. We'd have all those journalists over to our house, and they'd travel together, they'd go to Russia, it was this amazing program. But that internationalism has stayed with the college, you've always had a big dose of that, and I think that adds a wonderful flavor and texture to the campus life. And love of learning and liberal thought—I think it's a great school. I love the campus, it's a wonderful campus in an urban environment. A lot of kids really like that. That's unusual. I mean, you go to Carleton you have to be in Northfield [laughter]. Here you can be in Saint Paul. I just am very fond of the school, it's a wonderful school with a great tradition and they've done extremely well. So, it's a great school.

KB: Great. Do you have any other comments just before we close? Comments, memories, thoughts, about your experience on the board, anything about Macalester, your dad, whatever you want to say?

LM: Well, no. I'm very gratified by the fact that his memory lives on at the school. I'm impressed with how it has. I think that's interesting [laughter]. He was a big figure at the time, a very strong figure on the campus. But it's nice that he's so fondly remembered, and I really appreciate all the tributes. I still go to the Mitau lectures every year. You ever been to the Mitau lectures? You should go to the Mitau lecture. Do you know what that is even?

KB: It's a funded lecture show?

LM: Right. When he died, instead of the various charities or whatever he asked that all the contributions in honor of his life be put into this scholarship fund. He wanted it to be an active, on-going learning experience. So, you know what it is. They bring in a guest speaker from usually quite a well-known—some very well-known figures have come in on that. But he requires that they stay over, they teach some classes, some seminars, so that there's a real teaching involvement. And that's been going on now for twenty-five years...no, almost thirty years. Next year will be thirty years. So, I think that's a good legacy too, and I really appreciate that's still running. And again, I'm very flattered and honored that you asked me to do this, and in honor of my father I agreed to do it. So thank you.

KB: Great. Well we really appreciate your contribution. Thank you so much for your time!

End of interview [43:20]